

THE SEARCH

MATTHEW 2:1-12

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The month of January gets its name from the Roman god Janus, whose distinguishing feature was the ability to look both backwards and forwards simultaneously.

It's not a bad gift and it is a natural thing to do around the turn of the year.

Whenever I think of Janus, I think about my second grade teacher Miss

Harrington who, when a few of us armed ourselves with spitballs, sobered us with the warning – and convincing evidence – that she had eyes in the back of her head and was constantly watching us.

So in the spirit of Janus and Miss Harrington I suggest we do some looking backward and forward today at the start of this new year and then consider the ancient story of three travelers who visit the Christ child.

Looking back at 2004 perhaps the biggest thing on our minds today – concerning the world stage – is the recent natural disaster in the Indian Ocean. The magnitude of the devastation by the tsunami tidal waves is hard to comprehend and not yet fully known.

I was relieved to receive an email from our friend Henry Thiagaraj in Madras, India – the city now known as Chennai – where tidal waves obliterated the beaches and shipping ports. Henry described being awakened at 6:10AM one week ago when the disaster struck. His third floor apartment was shaking earthquake fashion for almost ten minutes. He reports that his vocational school and students – young men and women of the Untouchable or Dalit class – were unharmed though they now face the daunting task of survival and rebuilding.

My hope is that we can assist Henry and all who suffer through the Presbyterian Disaster Relief Agency and our prayers. If we are the hands and feet of Christ then this is an unprecedented opportunity to be Christ not just in the City of Buffalo but in a world that desperately needs us.

2004 was also a year of increased insurgency in Iraq. We have pledged to pray for world peace every Sunday and for all of those killed in this war on all sides of the conflict.

Today is the second Sunday of Christmas – the season when we celebrate the Prince of Peace. The pressing question, once again, for American Christians is how do we worship a God of peace and at the same time conduct ourselves in a world of war?

I'd wager you would get as many answers to that question as there are members of this congregation. My hope is that we can talk to one another about these issues and how we as a congregation can best be in St. Paul's words, "agents of reconciliation in the world."

And, of course, as the hands and feet of Christ and agents of reconciliation our own City of Buffalo needs, more than ever, committed, action-oriented churches. The economic and social ills of this city cried out in 2004 for our attention and response. 2005 will be the same. These are defining times for the churches and for this church.

2004 was a red-letter year for our church family. We celebrated 150 years of ministry with two major weekend events, visiting clergy, and social service agency partners.

Westminster has long been a congregation that has made its mark on the wider community. We remembered and celebrated those ministries of music, education and outreach of the past and present that are the great hallmark of this church.

I remember the words of one of our returning former pastors who said, "Westminster has been a voice for open mindedness, compassion, support for the oppressed and the willingness to take risks for the Gospel. Continue to use your voice," he urged us.

With our anonymous \$20,000 matching gift 2004 put us well on our way to exceeding \$700,000 in annual pledges. This will be an historic achievement for this congregation. Robust giving is the foundation of our mission and of a healthy church body.

But 2004 was preceded by five years of sustained leadership and hard work from our session, stewardship committee, campaign chairs, development and business staff. It is as remarkable an effort to turn around giving as I have ever seen.

And of course all that hard work matters because you responded. We have experienced an across-the-board increase of giving at every level. I know because I sign every response for every pledge and gift. It is an inspiring upward trend and bodes very well for our future.

Speaking of our future what about 2005? On February 12, here at church, we will host a special meeting of the Session and its committees and deacons to receive two reports.

The first will be the report on our proposed Big Mission Goal.

As you know, a task force of our Church and Community Committee has been working for the past several months to discern what God's big dream is for Westminster in our local mission and outreach. Focus groups, individual conversations, surveying community leaders has been part of the process.

A very exciting goal is emerging. It will require our best efforts and deepest sacrifice. It will bring hope and renewal to individuals and families on the West Side of Buffalo. I would tell you more but I have intentionally not been directly involved in the conversations to date. Yet what I hear is very exciting and precisely the challenge we need.

The other report on February 12 will be from another special task force that has been meeting nearly weekly since May. This group has been considering the comprehensive study and survey of our buildings and campus by a local architectural firm.

There are two kinds of issues. First repair and safety issues and secondly issues related to the reconfiguration of space to increase accessibility and make better use of our church buildings to accommodate our growing program needs.

Our church leaders on February 12 will be asked to listen to these reports and start asking questions about their merits. We will continue our process of discussion and discernment to determine how to build on our already strong relationship with the Ferguson Ave. neighborhood and how we need to change our campus to better serve our community. This process will involve all of us and will take the winter and spring.

Finally, like Janus, we will be looking backwards and forwards next week when we give thanks for and celebrate the ministries of Doug and Marta King and send them into the next chapter of their ministries.

Their absence will leave a big hole in our church family. We'll have vacancies in mission and outreach, pastoral care, and youth ministries. We are fortunate to have Courtney Mitchell as our interim Sunday School Coordinator and Ginny Bryan as our interim Youth Ministry Coordinator. I hope we will have an interim associate pastor soon as well.

But I can say to you that I have never worked with a church staff as committed, competent and collegial as this staff. Those qualities don't just happen. You have to be lucky to find people who have them then create an environment where those gifts are encouraged and nurtured. We will miss Doug and Marta. After their combined 31 years at Westminster it will feel strange, awkward and painful not having them in our midst to serve and worship and play with us. But at the same time I sense that we are ready to build on their dedicated ministry and follow where the Holy Spirit leads.

Shift with me to the reading from Matthew. This story of the three wise men is a story about seeking. It is the perfect metaphor for our faith. All of us are seekers. All of us, like the wise men, come from different and diverse backgrounds. All of us at times get lost. We long to discover what is true in life, then give the best we have to its service. Some say, this is the core religious impulse, the essence of being a spiritual person.

My hunch is that not many of us are here today for any theological purpose or to ponder the significance of the Incarnation. Rather, most of us are here trying to get a handle on our own lives.

Life can be difficult or uncontrollable or even perplexing. We hope something will be said in the sermon or a prayer or that there will be a glorious moment in the anthem that will point us, like a star, toward God's truth. And encountering that truth in the Christ child, or a blighted urban neighborhood or a friend with terminal disease then to serve him.

When I was in the second grade the other thing I was doing in Miss Harrington's class besides throwing spitballs was searching – for my way in life, what kind of person would, should, and could I be? All these years later I find myself searching as much now as then. My sense is that that might be true for you too. Given everything our world and city and congregation is facing it's more important than ever for us to follow the right star.

Friday night about fifty people gathered in Parish Hall to walk the labyrinth. As I got to the entrance into the large maze, the woman who was starting us said to me, "let go of what is holding you back, as you reach the center look for healing and wholeness, then make your way through the labyrinth back into the world.

That's not bad advice for any of us today. I don't know what your precise journey is that brings you here this morning, what seeking, what twistings and turnings you've experienced. But I do know this. If you dare to let go of what is holding you back, come to the manger and kneel then lay what you have before the Christ child, I promise, like the kings, you will go home another way. The way called blessed. The way to life. Amen